Desire in Absence: The Construction of Female Beauty in the Social Media Age

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Below: Image from video *Desire in Absence*

Abstract

Social media heavily influences our current female beauty culture by normalizing potentially harmful ideas and creating unrealistic expectations on the female body. These platforms promote practices as idealizing specific beauty standards, a surveillance culture, self-measuring, and the creation of a fake, desirable self. These pressures have the ability to cause harmful effects on a woman's body, mental health, and relationships with other females. This research forces a confrontation or realization of the lack of authenticity in social media beauty portrayals and the need for the individual to construct a more desirable "false-self". The pressure put on women to conform to contemporary beauty ideals leads to a strong desire for women to want to represent a version of themself they believe is absent.

Section 1

Standards of Female Beauty with the Rise of Social Media

Social media heavily influences our current beauty norms and materializes in various forms in our everyday lives. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram perpetuate harmful beauty practices while also establishing a culture that pressures women to conform to these standards. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "beauty" as "A combination of qualities, such as shape, colour, or form, that please the aesthetic senses, especially the sight" (beauty n. 1). These physical qualities are not specifically defined because they are constantly evolving to reflect the physical feature most valued in the contemporary culture. Even without engaging in social media myself, I observed how my thoughts and actions about my appearance, morning beauty routine, and self worth were shaped from the culture circulating from these outlets. My idea for *Desire in Absence* started by asking myself how these beauty structures were created and why have they been sustained with such intensity in connection to social media.

Feminist critics like Andrea Dworkin have studied how beauty is a cultural practice and one that is damaging to women, "Standards of beauty describe in precise terms the relationship an individual will have with her own body… They define precisely the dimensions of her physical freedom" (qtd. in Jeffreys 6). Not only do they affect a wide range of people, but these harmful practices have become so normalized in our society increasing the threat it poses to women. Dworkin continues by describing the

range of beauty practices women must perform on a daily basis to follow the standards of beauty:

> In our culture, not one part of a woman's body is left untouched, unaltered. No feature or extremity is spared the art, or pain, of improvement. Hair is dyed, lacquered, straightened, permanented; eyebrows are plucked, penciled, dyed; eyes are lined, mascaraed, shadowed; lashed are curled, or false – from head to toe, every feature of a woman's face, every section of her body, is subject to modification, alteration. (qtd. in Jeffreys 7)

Before even leaving home and whether women want to participate or not, they are forced with a choice to conform to these expected feminine norms or risk being shunned or judged by her peers. Every part of the female body and face is open for criticism, and in turn is subject to modifications and left open to attacks on self-esteem and self-worth.

In 2004, Dove began its Real Beauty Campaign aiming to celebrate the diversity of female bodies and increase the idea of confidence in one's natural body. The "love your body" (LYB) movement focuses on women feeling comfortable in their skin and believing they were beautiful no matter your clothing size. Beauty moved into self-love, but still with the emphasis on physical appearance. Women must show their "happiness" through physical beauty, even if that is not how you actually feel. It became further criticized through the uncovering of evidence claiming the lack of authenticity of LYB for utilizing makeup and Photoshop for their models in their photography campaigns. Even though it was textually advertised to be showing "real" women, what was shown to us was fake, a false persona. This Dove campaign highlights many contemporary problems in female beauty discourse, but one in particular is the emphasis of physical

beauty that must also connect to one's psychological beauty. United Kingdom sociologists in "Aesthetic Labour" identify that "…beauty is recast as 'a state of mind', but we do not see a loosening of the grip of punishing appearance standards for women, but rather a move of beauty into the arena of subjectivity, an extension of its force into psychic life as well" (A. Elias et al. 33). Within this rhetoric of confidence and self-love, the reality of this campaign shows us the difficulties of fighting against the strong cultural expectation for beauty in women.

Along with this marketing campaign Dove commissioned The Real Truth About Beauty, detailing a better global understanding of "what beauty means to women today and why that is" with empirical data (Etcoff et al. 2). Through interviews with 3,200 women, ages ranging from 18 to 64, and conducted across ten different countries, troubling data was extracted such as:

- "Only 2% of women around the world choose beautiful to describe their looks…" (9)
- "Despite mostly categorizing themselves as 'average' on beauty and physical attractiveness, almost half of all women (47%) rate their body weight as 'too high' – a trend that increases with age" (16).
- "60% of women agreed that society expects women to enhance their appearance." (25)
- "63% of women today agree that society expects them to be more physically attractive than their mother's generation was." (25)
- "Well over half of all women (57%) strongly agree that 'the attributes of female beauty have become very narrowly defined in today's world" (27)

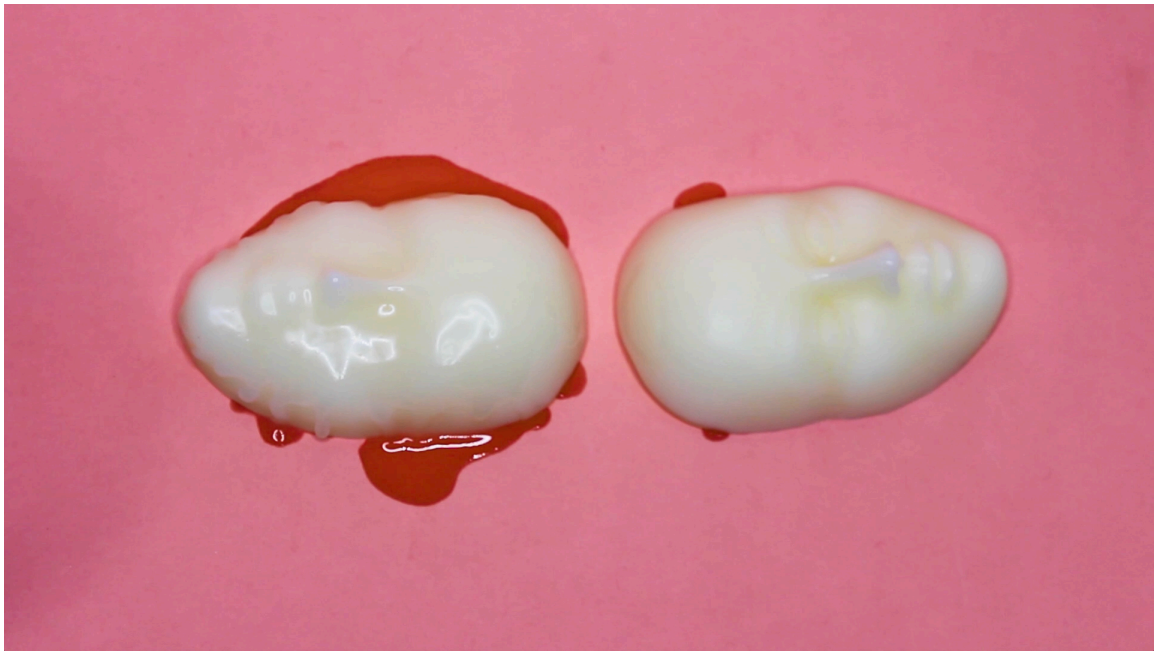
- "More than two-thirds (68%) of women strongly agree that the media and advertising set an unrealistic standard of beauty that most women can't ever achieve" (27)
- "Importantly, women who are more satisfied with their own beauty are significantly more likely… to think that non-physical factors, including happiness, confidence, dignity, humor, intelligence and wisdom contribute to making a woman beautiful… In comparison, women who are less satisfied with their beauty are significantly more likely than those who are more satisfied to think that makeup/cosmetics make a woman beautiful" (38)

This study illustrates how beauty ideals are poorly communicated in the mass media and that women measure their physical appearance against popular culture. Contributing to low self-esteem and body issues in these individuals.

The use of candy as the material in this project reflects some of the aesthetic and conceptual components shown in these images on social media. The artificial sugar and coloring in this commercial grade candy imitates the hidden inauthenticity in the online images. The smooth plastic feel and the highly saturated colors further replicate the visually misleading messages perpetuated on these platforms. The candy spontaneously melts from its original shape into a new form, mirroring the discrepancy between a social media image and the individual's authentic self. While it remains the same substance, the change the candy undergoes illustrates the potential deception of an object, image, or an individual.

In Figure 1, this still from the video titled “#like4like” examines how individuals team up on social media for mutual benefit, but in doing so propagates a specific opinion of beauty as well as a growing following of that endorsement. Instead of “liking” or sharing an image because of the content, women are pressured to follow the most liked or “trending” posts. The video “#like4like” consists of two small faces molded out of synthetic wax, an imitation of a naturally made substance, melting at different rates over a pink background. The identical faces lay motionless as their facial details begin to disappear and the form melts away. These faces, like the concept of like-for-like on social media, become monotonous as they reinforce the same or similarly minded beauty ideals. Once the heat is applied to the wax objects, the layers melt away creating a puddle of what it once was, revealing the lack of substance in the material. The wax faces expose the troubles the like-for-like mentality creates in perpetuating un-authentic or false ideas on social media. As with all of the components of this project, I chose to reverse the video showing the objects “un-melting” so the viewer could see this as a reoccurring action and not just a singular case from the individual.

Figure 1. Still image from “#like4like”



Section 2

Digital Surveillance of Beauty

Credited as the first social media site, Six Degrees was launched in 1997 with the goal of connecting individual profiles into their own social network. The success of Six Degree was followed by the creation of Friendster, LinkedIn, and MySpace and today over 2.62 billion people use social media sites worldwide. In 2019, some of the most popular sites include Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter and the number of platforms and users increases each year. With this growing technology, a new surveillance culture has infiltrated contemporary beauty culture. Inviting even more intense scrutiny to the female body, scopophilic surveillance encourages "women [to] pour over images of female actors and pop stars, with range of surveillant gazes: desiring, envious, anxious, hostile" (A. Elias et al. 14). Social media in combination with today's culture, promotes surveying the female body/face and has become a normalized component in the marketing of these sites. Women frequently look at celebrities, influencers, and real life friends as they police their appearance and behavior through their photographs. These images include a range of troupes from the duck face, the "caught in the moment" smile, the looking out into the distance pose, and the infamous mirror selfie among others. Surveillance helps maintain the current beauty standards, while also creating extreme pressure towards women to comply to these rules.

Within social media surveillance, the "quantified self" movement sees more women self-monitoring themselves on these sites. The "Aesthetic Labor" sociologists explain, "beauty apps might be understood as encouraging women to see and surveil themselves within a 'pedagogy of defect' (Bordo 1997) whilst also promising consumer

solutions" (A. Elias et al. 15-16). These filters can modify the body or face by brightening the skin, widening the eyes, adding different makeup styles, digitally trying plastic surgery options, and even substitute the human form for face recognition animal effects. Not only do filters and social media surveillance create a platform for self-measuring and monitoring, but it highlights the female body/face as an object, one that can be altered and often exploited for monetary gain.

"#instadaily" (Figure 2) critiques the female surveillance culture reinforced by the platform of social media. This scrutiny of images emphasizes what good beauty construction looks like, but in reality what is shown in the images is not necessarily what it appears at first glance. In the video still, the left most object consists of synthetic wax and blue candy in the shape of a human face. It melts away from the original, intended shape forming into a grotesque puddle of what it once was. Despite remaining the same material, when an outside force (such as the heat) is applied, the object became unrecognizable from the start of the video. Like the unreality of the images surveilled on social media, the right video depicts the transformation and also reveals to the viewer a glimpse of the tool used to disrupt the ideal image. Several moments of the heat gun nozzle randomly appear in the frame of the video, interrupting the illusion and invading into the protected, romanticized space. Figure 3, "#nofilter" troubles the concept of the quantitative self by rejecting the modifications to one's body/face that control the false persona created on social media. As the green candy shapes melt, the slime looking streaks rejects the deception an image can contain through the use of filters. The image's vibrate color and organic metamorphosis in the video refuses the self-measurement devices of social media.

Above: Figure 2. Still image from #instagood

Below: Figure 3. Still image from #nofilter

Section 3

Desiring the Absence

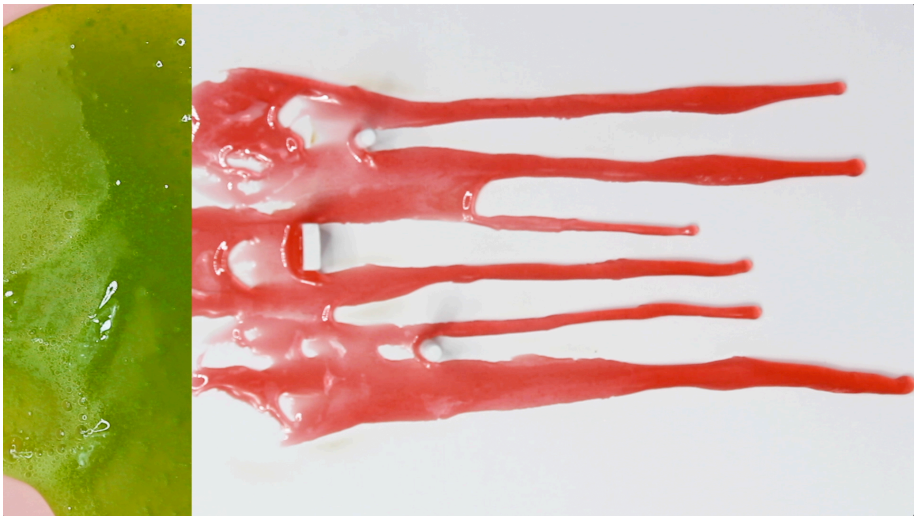
During the course of my research for this project, I found an abundance of articles and data claiming the negative impacts of media and celebrity culture on female beauty construction. With these statistics and research suggesting a link to dangerous body image and social media culture, I kept thinking why? Why then do women continue to not only participate in this culture, but to promote and enjoy it? Becoming an object of desire is an attractive thought; the feeling of being wanted, appreciated, and loved is something not many people would pass by. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's "theory conceives of desire as a longing for something already known as pleasurable or gratifying. Desire begins with recognizing the absence of a presence that was stimulating or gratifying or comforting. Desire holds within it the sense that something is missing" (Young-Eisendrath 59). However this natural want can change into an infatuation that exposes an unhealthy perspective circulated by the platform of social media. We are bombarded by countless images of beautiful celebrities in fantasy-like locations, each photo flawless and effortless. The best self is put on display on these sites, creating a new self from these heavily curated moments and images that establish this desire of wanting to hide parts of our true "self" and to acquire what another has. Young-Eisendrath describes this kind of unconscious desire as something more imaginary, without substance, "Instead of a direct sense of knowing and being, the self is experienced as imitating and pretending" (63). This false-self is the persona we typically see from an individual online and social media enhances these desires to replicate the behaviors we witness.

In figure 4 entitled #followme and the final image #repost (figure 5), show the candy objects as they begin to melt, revealing the false-self one desires to conceal. These videos not only show the deception as they melt and change form, but the projections display a reproduction of the actual objects forcing the viewer to further challenge what is "real" and what is artificial.

In *Desire in Absence,* I aimed to challenge some of the dangerous beauty constructions that have become normalized on social media platforms. Unpacking some of these questions exposed the complicated mechanisms underlying these websites, which were designed to connect people from around the world and be a fun form of entertainment and self-expression. While more research and conversation is needed, these videos present an interpretation of the influence social media has on contemporary female beauty construction and the practices that propagate these deep-rooted issues in our culture.

Above: Figure 4. Still from #followme

Below: Figure 5. Still from #repost



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